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THE MARBLED MURRELET MYSTERY.

The nest and nesting habits of the Marbled Murrelet (Brachyramphus marmoratus) remain unknown. This is the more remarkable when it is remembered that the bird is common throughout the summer season from Unalaska and Kodiak Islands south to Washington, and that many able field naturalists have sought to penetrate the mystery of its home life. According to W. L. Dawson, the Aleuts say it nests in holes and crevices along with the Ancient Murrelet (Synthliboramphus antiquus); while the Quillayutes believe it colonizes on some of the higher slopes of the Olympic Mountains, and nests in burrows. George G. Cantwell at Neah Bay in 1920 found not a single Indian who possessed even a theory regarding its nesting habits, tho one individual said his father told him the bird nests high in the rocks in the mountains. An Indian at Howkan, Long Island, Alaska, told Cantwell that hollow trees high in the mountains are utilized for nests. On the morning of May 11, 1905, Dawson heard Marbled Murrelets flying seaward high overhead at Glacier, Whatcom County, near the base of Mount Baker; and this is a most interesting record in view of the possibilities of the case.

J. Hooper Bowles of Tacoma took several birds early in May 1920, which had apparently not nested. Cantwell found the birds common on the ocean at the mouth of the Columbia River May 10 to 18, 1918, and reports that of three females secured, two contained two eggs each, and one bird one, in the oviduct. The egg in the last-named case was about an inch and one-half in diameter, and the breast of the bird showed a bare area, as if she had been setting. As Cantwell writes in his notes, "These birds are nesting close by, but where?"

Mr. Bowles writes in "The Murrelet" (Vol.I, No.2, p.9) that he was presented with an egg collected by Mr. C. de B. Green and believed to be that of the Marbled Murrelet, but "there is room for a possible doubt as no bird was found on the nest, although an adult bird with a young one unable to fly was collected a few yards off the island. A comparison of this egg with eggs of other Murrelets shows it to be the same size as an average egg of the Xantus Murrelet as might be expected from the similarity of the birds. It is much smaller than any of the Ancient Murrelet eggs in Mr. Bowles collection. In color it is between Xantus and Ancient, but the texture of shell differs from either of them. It was the only Murrelet nest found on the island amongst a liberal representation of Cassin's Auklets and Fork-tailed Petrels." The egg was taken late in July, 1920, on a small island off the coast of British Columbia.

It is possible, of course, that the birds nest many miles from the ocean, as a rule, for many of the Alcidae are known to cover unusual distances in their daily food-flights from the breeding grounds.

According to A. C. Bent, apparently the only positively identified egg of the Marbled Murrelet in existence is a nearly perfect specimen from the oviduct of a bird shot by Cantwell in the Prince of Wales Archipelago, Alaska, May 23, 1897, and now in the United States National Museum.

Here is a task for the membership of the Pacific Northwest Bird and Mammal Club. What ornithological detective will solve the Marbled Murrelet Mystery?

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